

# Rare seabird sightings off north and west Madagascar, January–February 2014

Dominic P. Rollinson

**Observations d'oiseaux de mer rares dans les eaux à l'ouest et au nord de Madagascar, janvier–février 2014.** Plusieurs oiseaux de mer rares ont été observés dans les eaux à l'ouest et au nord de Madagascar en janvier–février 2014, parmi lesquels le deuxième et troisième Puffin de Baillon *Puffinus bailloni* pour le pays. Le Pétrel de Barau *Pterodroma barau* a été noté une seule fois dans le sud-ouest, tandis que le Pétrel de Bulwer *Bulweria bulwerii* et le Pétrel de Jouanin *B. fallax* ont été rencontrés régulièrement – il y a peu de données de ces deux espèces de *Bulweria* pour la région malgache. Un Puffin à pieds pâles *Ardena carneipes* a été observé au large du nord de Madagascar ; cette espèce est régulièrement notée plus au sud, mais il y a peu de données au nord. Un Océanite de Wilson *Oceanites oceanicus* et un Labbe pomarin *Stercorarius pomarinus* ont été observés dans les eaux au nord-ouest et au nord de Madagascar, respectivement – les deux espèces sont très rares au large de l'île. Treize autres oiseaux de mer ont été rencontrés, la plupart desquels sont notés fréquemment au large de Madagascar.

**Summary.** Several rare seabird species were recorded during a trip off northern and western Madagascar in January–February 2014, including the second and third Tropical Shearwaters *Puffinus bailloni* for the country. Barau's Petrel *Pterodroma barau* was encountered once in the south-west, while Bulwer's *Bulweria bulwerii* and Jouanin's Petrels *B. fallax* were noted regularly—for either *Bulweria* species, very few records exist for the Madagascar region. A Flesh-footed Shearwater *Ardena carneipes* was observed off northern Madagascar; this species is regularly recorded further south, with few records from the north. A Wilson's Storm-petrel *Oceanites oceanicus* and a Pomarine Skua *Stercorarius pomarinus* were observed off north-western and northern Madagascar, respectively—both are very rare offshore. Thirteen other seabirds were also encountered, most of which are frequently recorded off Madagascar.

Whilst working as a marine mammal observer on board the *MV Maria*, I opportunistically observed seabirds off the north and west coasts of Madagascar. The survey lasted 25 days, from 15 January to 8 February 2014, between the Madagascan ports of Tulear and Antsiriana (Fig. 1). Observations were made from the best forward-facing platform, mostly from the bow deck, but also from the bridge and bridge wing. A DSLR camera with a 300-mm lens was used to take photographs to aid identification.

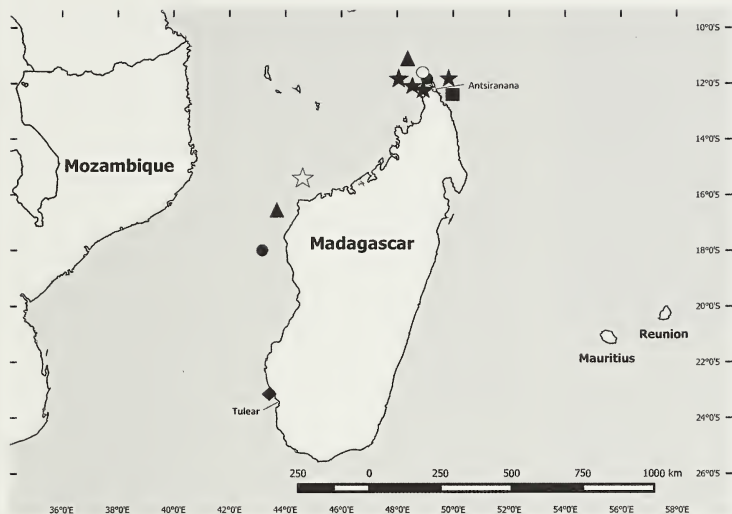
## Barau's Petrel *Pterodroma barau*

One seen c.50 km north-east of Tulear (23°03'S 43°09'E; Fig. 1) was identified by its mainly white underwing with dark-tipped primaries and black carpal bar, together with its mostly dark grey/brown upperparts with darker outer flight feathers and inner coverts, forming an 'M' across the upperwings (Onley & Schofield 2007). The obviously darker cap was also noted. It did not fly in the typically active *Pterodroma* style, but had a slightly more lethargic flight action, occasionally rising higher above the ocean before dipping down

again. There are only four previous Madagascan records, all of singles off Tolagnaro in October–January (Safford & Hawkins 2013).

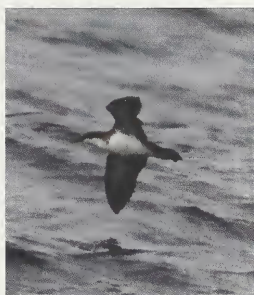
## Tropical Shearwater *Puffinus bailloni*

Singles were seen off north-western and northern Madagascar (Table 1). They were identified by their entirely dark brown/black upperparts, white underparts and mostly dusky underwings with broad, dark margins (Onley & Scofield 2007; Fig. 2). Flight action was characterised by rapid flapping, interspersed by fairly short glides, low above the ocean. Both individuals were dark-vented birds, typical of the northern subspecies *P. b. nicolae* / *temptator*. Although differentiation in the field of the two subspecies (of which *temptator* is considered by some authorities to belong to a separate species, Persian Shearwater *P. persicus*; cf. del Hoyo & Collar 2014) is difficult, both birds appeared to be *P. b. temptator* based on the very dark brown/black upperparts (*P. b. nicolae* has sooty-brown upperparts) and the duskier underwings (paler in *P. b. nicolae*). The closest known breeding population of *P. b.*



**Figure 1.** Sightings of rare seabirds off northern and western Madagascar, January–February 2014. Observations d'oiseaux de mer rares dans les eaux au nord et à l'ouest de Madagascar, janvier–février 2014.

◆ = Barau's Petrel / Pétrel de Barau *Pterodroma baraui*; ▲ = Tropical Shearwater / Puffin de Baillon *Puffinus bailloni*; ■ = Flesh-footed Shearwater / Puffin à pieds pâles *Ardenna carneipes*; ● = Bulwer's Petrel / Pétrel de Bulwer *Bulweria bulwerii*; ★ = Jouanin's Petrel / Pétrel de Jouanin *B. fallax*; ☆ = Wilson's Storm-petrel / Océanite de Wilson *Oceanites oceanicus*; ○ = Pomarine Skua / Labbe pomarin *Stercorarius pomarinus*.



**Figure 2.** Tropical Shearwater *Puffinus bailloni*, off north-western Madagascar, 17 January 2014, showing the typically pale underparts, with dark margins to the underwings and dark vent, and black upperparts (Dominic P. Rollinson)

Puffin de Baillon *Puffinus bailloni*, dans les eaux au nord-ouest de Madagascar, 17 janvier 2014, montrant les parties inférieures typiquement pâles, avec le dessous des ailes au bord sombre et le bas-ventre sombre, et les parties supérieures noires (Dominic P. Rollinson)

*temptator* occurs on Mohéli, Comoros, c.500 km from north-west Madagascar (Safford & Hawkins 2013), but the existence of an unknown breeding population closer to Madagascar cannot be ruled out. These represent the second and third records of Tropical Shearwater from Madagascan waters, the only previous sighting being c.80 km off Tulear (Safford & Hawkins 2013).

### Flesh-footed Shearwater *Ardenna carneipes*

One was seen off north Madagascar in water >1,000 m deep (Fig. 1). The bird flew to investigate the vessel and followed it for several minutes. The



**Figure 3.** Flesh-footed Shearwater *Ardenna carneipes*, off northern Madagascar, 25 January 2014, showing its bicoloured bill, shorter, more rounded tail and broader wings than the locally common Wedge-tailed Shearwater *A. pacifica* (Dominic P. Rollinson)

Puffin à pieds pâles *Ardenna carneipes*, au large du nord de Madagascar, 25 janvier 2014, montrant son bec bicolore, sa queue plus courte et plus arrondie et ses ailes plus larges que celles du Puffin fouquet *A. pacifica*. Ce dernier est localement plus commun (Dominic P. Rollinson)

bird was identified by its fairly short, rounded tail in combination with broader wings and a pale bill with obvious dark tip, easily separating it from the commoner Wedge-tailed Shearwater *A. pacifica* (Onley & Schofield 2007; Fig. 3).

Flesh-footed Shearwater is considered to be a regular migrant to the Malagasy region (Safford & Hawkins 2013). However, until recently there were very few records, probably due to confusion with the similar Wedge-tailed Shearwater, which is common throughout the region (Safford & Hawkins 2013). Most sightings are from southern and eastern Madagascar, with three birds seen around Europa Island, but there are no records



from further north in the Mozambique Channel (Safford & Hawkins 2013). Vagrants have occurred further north, with seven records from Seychelles, in May–July and October–December, including at least 100 at the edge of the Seychelles Bank east of Mahé, a region almost never visited by ornithologists, seen daily over a three-week period in July, suggesting the species may be common (Skerrett *et al.* 2006, 2007 and *in Bull. ABC* 22: 109).

**Bulwer’s Petrel *Bulweria bulwerii***

Two singles were observed off northern and one off western Madagascar (Fig. 1). Two were over water >1,000 m deep. Nine birds, seen briefly or at great distance, could not be identified to species and were treated as Bulwer’s / Jouanin’s Petrel *B. fallax* (Table 1). Those seen sufficiently well were separated from Jouanin’s Petrel by their more delicate structure, longer caudal projection and more delicate bill, as well as differences in the pale upperwing-coverts (Onley & Scofield 2007; Fig. 4). Flight pattern was also different: Bulwer’s Petrel showed a more erratic flight with regular flapping, compared to Jouanin’s Petrel which did



**Figure 4.** Bulwer’s Petrel *Bulweria bulwerii*, off northern Madagascar, 1 February 2014 (left) and Jouanin’s Petrel *B. fallax*, off northern Madagascar, 21 January 2014; note differences in shape of paler upperwing-coverts, with Bulwer’s Petrel being more teardrop-shaped and more crisply defined. Jouanin’s Petrel also has a heavier bill and shorter tail (Dominic P. Rollinson)

Pétrel de Bulwer *Bulweria bulwerii*, 1er février 2014 (à gauche) et Pétrel de Jouanin *B. fallax*, 21 janvier 2014, tous deux photographiés au large du nord de Madagascar ; noter les différences dans la forme des couvertures plus pâles du dessus de l’aile, celles du Pétrel de Bulwer étant plus en forme de larme et mieux définies. Le Pétrel de Jouanin a également un bec plus fort et une queue plus courte (Dominic P. Rollinson)

**Table 1.** Sightings of rare seabird species off northern and western Madagascar, January–February 2014.

**Tableau 1.** Observations d’oiseaux de mer rares dans les eaux au nord et à l’ouest de Madagascar, janvier–février 2014.

| Species                                                          | Date       | Location              | Number |
|------------------------------------------------------------------|------------|-----------------------|--------|
| Barau’s Petrel<br><i>Pterodroma barau</i>                        | 15 January | 23°03’06”S 43°09’30”E | 1      |
| Tropical Shearwater<br><i>Puffinus bailloni</i>                  | 17 January | 17°04’24”S 43°46’30”E | 1      |
|                                                                  | 22 January | c.12°S 48°E           | 1      |
| Flesh-footed Shearwater<br><i>Ardenna carneipes</i>              | 25 January | 12°28’52”S 49°55’26”E | 1      |
| Bulwer’s Petrel<br><i>Bulweria bulwerii</i>                      | 16 January | 17°46’34”S 43°09’27”E | 1      |
|                                                                  | 1 February | 11°16’36”S 48°52’52”E | 1      |
| Jouanin’s Petrel<br><i>Bulweria fallax</i>                       | 18 January | 11°50’00”S 47°58’48”E | 1      |
|                                                                  | 21 January | 12°04’11”S 48°25’37”E | 1      |
|                                                                  | 30 January | 11°48’56”S 49°49’01”E | 1      |
|                                                                  | 2 February | 11°54’40”S 48°58’34”E | 2      |
| Jouanin’s / Bulwer’s Petrel<br><i>Bulweria fallax / bulwerii</i> | 27 January | 11°52’25”S 49°59’00”E | 2      |
|                                                                  | 31 January | 11°25’02”S 50°02’04”E | 1      |
|                                                                  | 31 January | 11°25’06”S 50°02’06”E | 1      |
|                                                                  | 1 February | 11°37’43”S 49°29’09”E | 1      |
|                                                                  | 1 February | 11°39’24”S 49°26’17”E | 1      |
|                                                                  | 2 February | 11°54’53”S 48°58’46”E | 1      |
|                                                                  | 2 February | 11°44’49”S 48°50’32”E | 1      |
|                                                                  | 7 February | 12°52’47”S 50°22’41”E | 1      |
| Wilson’s Storm-petrel<br><i>Oceanites oceanicus</i>              | 17 January | 17°15’53”S 43°34’09”E | 1      |
| Pomarine Skua<br><i>Stercorarius pomarinus</i>                   | 23 January | 11°06’14”S 48°44’32”E | 1      |

not flap as much and would generally fly higher above the ocean in a more direct manner.

Bulwer’s Petrel is a scarce migrant in the Malagasy region, with most records south of Réunion (Safford & Hawkins 2013); most Indian Ocean records are thought to originate from the north-west Pacific breeding population (Marchant & Higgins 1990). There are scattered records throughout the region, mostly from waters east and south of Madagascar (Safford & Hawkins 2013). The only records west of Madagascar are of three birds south of Europa Island (Veit *et al.* 2007) and another two c.250 km south of Juan de Nova Island (Read *et al.* 2014), all seen in January. There are only two authenticated records north of Madagascar, both from Seychelles in June: a single on Cousin Island and two c.200 km south-east of Mahé (Skerrett *et al.* 2011 and *in Bull. ABC* 22:

109). An old published record 300 km west of the Amirantes in April was not accepted by Seychelles Bird Records Committee (SBRC) due to the absence of any documentation (Bailey *et al.* 1968).

### Jouanin's Petrel *Bulweria fallax*

Four confirmed sightings of five individuals were made off northern Madagascar in waters >1,000 m deep (Fig. 1). All birds had obviously pale upperwing-coverts (Fig. 3), with some showing extensive pale feathering around the forehead and chin, suggesting they were moulting (Ryan 2005). Van den Berg *et al.* (1991) noted that the majority of Jouanin's Petrels in the northern Indian Ocean in June–July also had pale upperwing-coverts.

Little is known of either the distribution at sea or breeding biology of Jouanin's Petrel. Its single known breeding colony was only recently discovered, on Socotra, between Yemen and Somalia (Taleb 2002), and there have been comparatively few sightings at sea away from the Arabian coast, probably due to its small population and the difficulties of separating this species from Bulwer's Petrel. Although most sightings have been made in the north-west Indian Ocean, the species is known to reach the south-east Indian Ocean in smaller numbers (Bailey 1968, Parson 2000, Ryan *et al.* 2013, Sinclair & Langrand 2013). According to Sinclair & Langrand (2013) it is rare near Madagascar, with most records from much further north, closer to Seychelles. On a number of voyages throughout the western Indian Ocean, Bailey (1968) had regular sightings around the equator, with only one further south, at 08°S. Safford & Hawkins (2013) mention that the species is probably a regular migrant in the Malagasy region in October–February, with most sightings from the north. Veit *et al.* (2007) had several sightings north-west and north-east of Madagascar in January. SBRC has accepted 12 records in Seychelles waters, with reports in all months except January and August–September (Skerrett *et al.* 2011 and in *Bull. ABC* 22: 109).

### Wilson's Storm-petrel *Oceanites oceanicus*

One seen off north-west Madagascar (Fig. 1) was identified by its dark brown/black plumage throughout, except the white rump and pale brown upperwing-coverts. Its underwings were entirely black, differentiating the species from the similar European Storm-petrel *Hydrobates*



**Figure 5.** First-winter Pomarine Skua *Stercorarius pomarinus*, off northern Madagascar, 23 January 2014 (Dominic P. Rollinson)

Labbe pomarin *Stercorarius pomarinus* de premier hiver, au large du nord de Madagascar, 23 janvier 2014 (Dominic P. Rollinson)

*pelagicus* (Onley & Scofield 2007). Although the species is thought to be a regular passage migrant in the region, there are very few confirmed records from Madagascar and its status is considered uncertain (Safford & Hawkins 2013).

### Pomarine Skua *Stercorarius pomarinus*

One seen off northern Madagascar (Figs. 1 & 5) was identified as a first-winter and differentiated from Arctic Skua *S. parasiticus* by its uniform dark head, pale hind-collar, pale uppertail-coverts, boldly barred undertail-coverts, broad-based wings and distinctly bicoloured bill (Harrison 1982). There is only one previous record for Madagascar, one 11.5 km off the south-west coast at Anakao (Safford & Hawkins 2013).

### Other seabirds

An additional 13 seabird species, described as regular in the region, were encountered (Safford & Hawkins 2013; Table 2). Several of these were common only along the coast. Some regularly investigated the vessel, such as Red-footed *Sula sula* and Masked Boobies *S. dactylatra*, and White-tailed Tropicbirds *Phaethon lepturus*. Red-footed Boobies were observed aerially hunting flying fish flushed by the moving vessel.

The sightings reported here suggest that some species, particularly Bulwer's and Jouanin's Petrels, may be more frequent in the south-west Indian Ocean than previously thought. As there



**Table 2.** Other seabirds observed off northern Madagascar, January–February 2014.

**Tableau 2.** Autres oiseaux de mer observés dans les eaux au nord de Madagascar, janvier–février 2014.

| Species                                           | No. of sightings | Area                |
|---------------------------------------------------|------------------|---------------------|
| Wedge-tailed Shearwater <i>Ardenna pacifica</i>   | Common           | Throughout          |
| Lesser Frigatebird <i>Fregata ariel</i>           | Common           | Throughout          |
| Greater Frigatebird <i>Fregata minor</i>          | Common           | Throughout          |
| White-tailed Tropicbird <i>Phaethon lepturus</i>  | Common           | North / north-west  |
| Red-footed Booby <i>Sula sula</i>                 | Common           | Throughout          |
| Masked Booby <i>Sula dactylatra</i>               | Common           | North / north-west  |
| Brown Noddy <i>Anous stolidus</i>                 | Common           | Throughout          |
| Lesser Noddy <i>Anous tenuirostris</i>            | Common           | North only          |
| Sooty Tern <i>Onychoprion fuscatus</i>            | Common           | Throughout          |
| Bridled Tern <i>Onychoprion anaethetus</i>        | 4                | Coastal, north-west |
| Common Tern <i>Sterna hirundo</i>                 | Common           | Coastal, throughout |
| Lesser Crested Tern <i>Thalasseus bengalensis</i> | Common           | Coastal, throughout |
| Greater Crested Tern <i>Thalasseus bergii</i>     | Common           | Coastal, throughout |

are relatively few ornithological data from the seas around Madagascar, our knowledge of species occurrence and abundance awaits clarification in many cases.

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